

Fake It 'Til You Make It by TheMikeWheelers (jasongracefully)

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Summary:

Mike and El figured they would just mess with their friends a bit, they could get back at them for all the years of teasing. But fake dating never works out so easily.

1. The Plan

Mike had gotten used to the teasing. It had been 4 years since he and the boys had met El, and that had given him plenty of time to familiarize himself with the jokes, the mocking, the kissing-faces that after so long, still made him blush.

He could never understand the teasing. Sure, when he was *twelve years old* he had asked her to the Snow Ball, but that was years ago. El was one of his best friends, he most-definitely didn't have feelings for her. And she didn't like him either, he was sure of that. There was nothing that could make Mike believe El liked him as more than a friend.

Not that he thought about it a lot, that was something he would deny. Okay, he'd admit that *maybe* he occasionally thought whether or not El liked him, but that was only because the boys always brought up the topic. Not because he wanted her to or anything-- that was one thing he insisted on.

Either way, it didn't matter, because Mike swore he didn't like El as anything more than a friend, well, a best friend maybe, but that was it. And he fully believed that El's feelings were the same.

It had all started with that Friday night, November 6th, 1987. The five friends had made it a tradition every year to hold a commemorative Dungeons & Dragons game on the anniversary of Will's disappearance. It was their way of making light of it all. That day wasn't exactly a fond memory, launching the friends into the most terrifying week of their lives, and sending Will to the Upside Down. So instead they tried to make something positive out of the day. They played D&D, looked back at how different everything was from the year before, and they celebrated the one good thing that came out of the experience-- meeting El.

As always, Mike was the dungeon master, and their campaign was almost finished. He was sharing the finale of their long story, ending with the marriage of the princess and her knight-in-shining-armor.

The boys all whined at the sappiness, something Mike always looped

into the resolution of campaigns, and their least favorite part. They all preferred the action.

“Enough with the mushiness,” Lucas griped.

Dustin let out a groan, “El’s a lucky girl, but we don’t want to hear the romance crap.”

El’s eyes widened upon hearing her name, while Mike just blushed profusely.

“Shut up,” He grumbled.

The boys snickered for a few moments, even Will laughed, though he normally abstained from the teasing. They were interrupted by the clearing of someone’s throat at the top of the stairs.

Nancy was home from college for the weekend, taking a short visit back before Thanksgiving. She stood above with her arms crossed, “Mike, Mom sent me down. It’s already 10:30, it’s late and she wants you to go to sleep.”

Mike rolled his eyes, he knew his mother would come kick his friends out any second.

“Guess that’s our cue to leave.” Will stood up, and the rest of the friends followed.

“Later Mike.”

“See ya tomorrow.”

Nancy had made her way down the stairs, sitting next to Mike, “I’m surprised you tolerate all that.”

“Huh?”

“The teasing. With you and El,” She raised her eyebrows at him, “I figured it must embarrass you a lot.”

“I’m used to it.”

“Do you ever wonder what they would do if you and El actually started dating?”

Mike almost shot out of his seat, “What?! We’re not going to date.”

“Calm down, Mike,” Nancy rolled her eyes, “I’m just saying their reactions would be pretty hilarious if you did.”

She stood up and walked out of the basement, leaving Mike to wonder at what she had just said.

What did she mean about their reactions? That question left Mike thinking. How would his friends react if he and El dated?

Mike figured the teasing would probably get much worse, but at least it would be called for. He tried to shut the idea from his mind. Like he told Nancy, he and El weren't going to date, why was he thinking about this so much?

Then an idea popped into his mind, something he figured he would never act on, but it still made him laugh to consider. After all these years of being teased, what if he and El could get a little payback?

His mind devised a plan, one he never intended to pursue, but still the thoughts still jumbled through his mind as he fell asleep that night.

The next day, El came over in the morning. Mike had invited her over to watch movies with him. He knew she wasn't so interested in campaigns, so he always made sure to make special plans for her the day after one.

“What's that?” El plopped herself down onto the couch, picking up the copy of *War and Peace* that was left on the cushion, “Are you reading this?”

“Oh God no,” Mike stared at the giant book, “It’s probably Nancy’s. She must have left it down here when she was talking to me last night.”

“What were you and Nancy talking about?”

Mike's response came to his mouth before his mind, "You."

"What?" El raised her eyebrows at him.

"Not, uh, in a weird way or anything. Just, um, she was talking about the boys always teasing us, ya know, saying we're dating. She was saying how they would react if we actually dated. N- not that I'm saying we would though!" Mike stammered through his response, and awkward blush forming.

"Oh."

It went quiet for a few moments. The same thoughts that raced through Mike's mind the previous night were now hitting El.

"Do you ever wonder how they would react though?" He broke the silence.

"What?"

"If we dated. The guys would probably think it was pretty funny."

"What are you saying?" El looked at Mike, but he was refusing to make eye contact.

"I had an idea last night. Actually, it's stupid. Nevermind, just ignore me."

She nudged his arm, "Mike."

"What if we could kinda get back at the boys for all the teasing?" El raised her eyebrows and he continued, "A prank."

"What kind of prank?" Her voice was cautious.

"We could tell everyone we're dating, just to see how they would react and stuff. And then we could mess with them for a little bit."

"Let's do it," El grinned.

Mike looked back at her, eyes wide open, "Wait what?"

"It sounds fun."

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah. I mean, unless you don't want to,” She glanced over to him for confirmation.

Mike's mouth was gaping open, “Uh, um, sure! Do you really want to do this?”

“The guys are coming over later, right? We could start it then.”

“Can't wait,” Mike's blush was turning his entire face bright red, “So do you want to watch the movie, uh, girlfriend?”

“Sure, um, boyfriend.” El had her own blush starting.

Mike went to turn on the movie, rubbing the back of his neck, in desperate need to get rid of his worsening blush.

There was one thing he was sure of though. Despite all the blushing, and all the awkwardness that was sure to ensue-- this was going to be fun.

He smirked to himself. This was going to be *really* fun.

2. Prove It

Their movie had just finished when Mike and El heard the familiar noise of the basement door opening. Footsteps pounded down the stairs as Lucas, Will, and Dustin came to join them for the day.

Mike immediately reached out for Eleven's hand, intertwining it with his. She raised her eyebrow at him, giving him a questioning look.

"For the plan," He mouthed to her, just before the other three boys had made their way to the bottom of the stairs.

"Hey lovebirds," Lucas grinned at them, "How are you doing today?"

"We're doing great," Mike responded, looking over at El, "We actually wanted to talk to you about something."

It was as if right then the boys noticed their locked hands, giving confused looks towards the duo on the couch.

"What's going on?" Will asked.

"Well, um, uh." There it was. The blush that Mike knew was coming had appeared over his face and was now dripping down his neck. He tried to yell at himself to ignore it, this was just a part of the plan, he needed to hold it together. But that didn't stop him from stuttering and becoming a flustered mess.

Luckily for Mike, El responded for him, as suave as he wished he could sound right now, "We're dating."

It was as if with that one sentence, the world went silent. The boys couldn't form a response, just staring at Mike and El with mouths gaping and eyes popping out of their heads.

"Y-you're dating?!" Dustin demanded.

The boys had spent years teasing them, just waiting for them to finally get together. But they never expected them to actually admit it so casually one day.

Mike nodded his head, his blush being replaced with a sly grin.

“Are you serious?”

“No way!”

“I don't believe you!”

Mike just shrugged and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Nancy!” Dustin called up the stairs, “Come down here! It's important!”

Oh no, Mike thought. Nancy was the one person who he thought might see through their plan. He didn't want her ruining it before it even started.

“What's going on?” Nancy asked, sauntering down the steps.

“Mike and El are dating.”

Nancy took on a mischievous smile, as if she knew way too much. Mike gulped as she turned to face him, “Is that right, Mike?”

He nodded, beads of sweat forming on his forehead. She must know, he figured, she must be planning on making a mockery out of this.

“We can prove it.” El had been silent for the past minute, but now she spoke up. Mike was suddenly so grateful for her. He didn't know if it was telepathy or if she just felt the sweat that must be pooling in his hands, but she knew exactly how he felt. She was getting ready to save him from however Nancy was planning to mess with him.

One thing concerned him though, what did she mean when she said they could prove it? They weren't actually dating, and even if they were, they wouldn't be able to prove anything. What did she mean?

Mike looked over at her, raising one eyebrow in question. She just grinned before leaning towards him.

Mike realized what she was doing about a second before she did it. Her lips pressed onto his and he swore, if her hand wasn't still

grasping onto his, keeping him anchored to the moment, the electricity of the kiss may have shot him ten feet back.

They had only kissed once before, years ago. It was a short kiss, and Mike figured El couldn't even remember it. He never brought it up to her, too embarrassed by his week-long crush.

But kissing her now, with all the energy between their lips, felt different. It felt familiar. They had kissed only one time previously, but the feeling of her so close to him, with their mouths pressed together, felt so inherently familiar to Mike. It was as if they'd kissed hundreds of times before.

Their kiss was short, just long enough so that the boys' mouths dropped seeing them. Mike and El pulled away, giving a teasing smile to the four people in front of them.

El smirked at them, "Told you we could prove it."

"Wow, uh, congrats I guess," Will mumbled out, "Now what do you guys want to do?"

Nancy retreated back upstairs while the five teenagers resorted to playing Uno. After a few games, however, Lucas told them he had to return home to do chores, and Dustin said he had to leave as well to work on some homework. Will, who didn't want to third wheel with his adoptive sister, excused himself too. Soon enough, it was just El and Mike in the basement again.

As soon as they heard the door close upstairs, signaling they were finally alone, the pair burst out laughing.

"They didn't even believe us!" El giggled.

"You would think that after how much they teased us over this, they would at least believe it!"

"They thought it was fake," Eleven continued, "Dustin even brought Nancy down to decide!"

"I still can't believe they made us do that," Mike felt his face heat up at the memory, but chose to ignore it.

El didn't notice her face turning red as well. She had kept it cool in front of their audience earlier, she had plenty of experience keeping her emotions in check around other people, but now that she was alone with Mike, all the embarrassment from earlier was coming back.

"I know."

"I'm surprised they made us do that," Mike avoided eye contact with her, "They really made us have our first kiss in front of them."

"They probably didn't think it was our first. And technically, it wasn't our-" She cut herself off, a redness erupting around her face.

Mike didn't even notice her blush, he was too consumed with what she had just said. He stared up at her, eyes open wide, "Y-you remember that?"

"Of course," She whispered it, nodding her head faintly.

Mike always assumed there was no way El remembered their kiss when they were twelve. It was an eventful day, after all, and she had disappeared that night. That year she was missing, she definitely had more important things to think about than what had happened with Mike.

When she came back, neither of them acknowledged it. They pretended it hadn't happened and continued on as friends. It was four years ago at this point, Mike thought she must have forgotten it.

"That was a long time ago." Mike whistled to himself.

"It was."

Mike wasn't sure what to say after that. El and he sat in silence, not an awkward silence, but the kind that had become so important to them. The kind of silence where all your words were out there, not needing to be said.

His thoughts drifted away, he focused on El's hand, still holding his. They held hands for the plan, for the boys, for appearances, but even now that the boys had left, they seemed to forget all about that. Their

hands were still enlaced, and Mike didn't feel as if anything was out of the ordinary.

After all, her hands weren't out of the ordinary for him. They were a comfort to him, it was like he always had a place to secure himself with her. Their hands kept them connected.

And tonight, Mike didn't feel like letting go.

3. In The Dark You Lit Me Up

It all started when Lucas had asked Mike if he was doing anything with El tomorrow night.

“Why’d you think that? He countered, while stuffing his face with his sandwich over their lunch table.

“Because, you’ve been dating her for almost a week now and you still haven’t gone on an actual date,” To be fair, Mike had pretty much forgotten about his plan with El. They kept it up over the weekend, and then he was thrown into an intense week of school and barely even had any time to see her, “Besides, tomorrow’s, uh, you know”

Lucas raised his eyebrows at Mike, hoping he would know what he was trying to say. A crumb dropped from Mike’s mouth to the table. Unfortunately, he knew exactly what he meant. It was Mike’s least favorite day of the year, the anniversary of when El had gone missing.

He still remembered that night in 1983 vividly. He remembered all the pain and heartache he went through, and he remembered how it felt for almost a year afterwards. So far he had lived through 3 of those anniversaries, and for each one he seemed to cling onto El more. It wasn’t a happy memory, and every year he dreaded the reminder. Mike was glad to have her back, but as far as he was concerned, he’d rather think she had never left.

He knew November 12th was coming up, it was always a couple days before the date when he started to feel the memories and the sadness return. Normally the boys did their best to make sure both Mike and El were fine and distracted, but they were all so busy with junior year that they struggled with it this time around.

Lucas cleared his throat, “You should do something. It’ll help you take your mind off everything, and you’ll have a good time with her. You can make your own happy memory for the night.”

“You’re right.” Mike wasn’t even thinking about their plan, he wasn’t thinking about a date, all he really cared about was that he was with

El. The idea of them being separated that night, of all the nights they could be apart, really tore at him. He didn't feel the need to make some extravagant plans, but he wanted to be with her, "We could go see *The Princess Bride* while it's still in theaters."

"You're going to see *The Princess Bride* on your first date?" Lucas raised his eyebrows.

Mike blushed at his movie choice, "What's the big deal? I don't have to impress her or anything, it's just El."

"Just the girl you've been in love with since you were twelve."

"I'm not in love with her!"

"You're dating her now, you don't have to deny your feelings anymore," Lucas ignored him.

Mike blushed at his slip-up. He was so used to putting down the boys' teasing about him and El, he completely forgot about their prank. Now he had to embrace all their jokes. It wasn't like anything he said could make them believe he didn't have feelings for her, but he couldn't be too careful. He needed to make sure they didn't doubt anything.

So Mike took in a deep breath, and started to say the one thing that he had spent years denying, "You're right," He whispered quietly, gaining Lucas's attention, "I'm in love with El."

"I know. I've always known." Lucas was proud of finally getting him to admit it, while Mike just tried to ignore how he claimed to always know this, when Mike was just making it up for the plan.

That was how Mike had found himself sitting inside the Hawkins movie theater at 5pm on a Thursday night, with El by his side as he watched the chronicles of Westley and Buttercup.

Around halfway through the movie, Mike felt the exhaustion hit him. He had spent the previous night up late talking to El, a much needed therapy session after they hadn't been able to see each other much the past week. He asked her to the movie, and told her about his conversation with Lucas, awkwardly leaving out the part where he

said he was in love with her. He wasn't sure why he didn't want to tell El about it, it wasn't like it was serious. It was all for the plan, he had convinced himself of that. But either way, he wanted to keep the confession private, something about the idea of telling her terrified Mike.

He felt the yawn coming on, and didn't think much about it. Mike had been sleepy all day, but it wasn't until he was mid-yawn that he noticed the predicament he had gotten himself into.

Mike had his arms stretched out behind him, when he noticed the slight shift in how El was sitting. She had sat up straighter, and though she was staring intently at the screen, Mike could tell by her facial expression that she was thinking about something far closer to home.

That's when it hit Mike, he was yawning in a movie theater, she had probably expected him to put his arm around her, pulling out the oldest trick in the book. He instantly pulled his arms right back to his side, not wanting her to think any more of his actions. Mike was suddenly glad for the darkness of the theater, the black around him shrouded the red on his cheeks. He heated up thinking about that, but one thing caught his attention more.

El had slumped back into her seat, no longer up straight with good posture. Her gaze was still fixed onto the screen ahead, but something about her looked different. Her small smile had fallen, and it was as if the light the sparkled in her eyes had just disappeared.

Mike stared at her, his brows furrowing. What had happened to make her demeanor change so quickly? Then it hit him, El had expected him to put his arm around her, only for him to shoot it back to his side. Was she disappointed? Mike couldn't believe that she was, it wasn't like her. Besides, why would she even want him to do that?

Even still, Mike's intuition told him that was the root of the problem. Hesitantly, he raised his arms again, letting out a fake yawn. He saw El look over at him from the corner of her eye, a slight smirk forming on her face.

He brought his arms around his head, slowing placing one hand onto

her shoulder. He could feel the goosebumps on her, and could tell he was forming some as well.

Mike tried to brush off the goosebumps. It was the middle of November and they were both wearing short sleeves. That had to be the cause of the goosebumps, the cold, definitely nothing else.

His arm relaxed around her, and Mike swore, if it wasn't for the loud noises echoing from the speakers around them, the entire theater could hear heart his heart beating three times as fast.

"Are you tired?" El had looked up at him, a gentleness in her eyes that did nothing to ease his pounding heart.

He just nodded his head, not trusting his mouth to form words right now. Mike didn't understand what was going on, why all of a sudden he felt as if his lungs were fighting for escape from his body, but he knew there was no way he'd be able to talk.

El edged herself closer to him, "Me too." She rested her head onto his shoulder, and if Mike's heart wasn't already echoing out of his chest, it was then.

She wasn't having the easiest time keeping a level-head either. El felt her face flush as she leaned down onto Mike, instantly regretting the decision. He was so close to her, and she could feel his heart beating from where her head rested on his chest. Why was his heart beating so quickly? Her redness only seemed to grow, she figured she must be bothering him with her position.

She brushed that thought away. Her head on his shoulder wasn't unusual for them, since they were twelve that was an ordinary thing for them. Falling asleep on him, using each other for support. Mike and El always had each other's shoulders, whether to cry on, to rest on, or for anything else, they always had each other.

El wasn't sure what was making Mike's heart beat so quickly, but in that moment she couldn't deny it, their closeness was making a few butterflies form in her own stomach. It confused her, this was no different from any other time she was in this position with him. Why all of a sudden did his arm around her make her feel like her heart

was pounding on her rib cage, desperate for escape?

Both Mike and El's minds were hammering, but that didn't last for long. The all-too-familiar sound of snickering was heard behind them.

"He's not gonna do it. He's too scared."

"I'm telling you, nothing's gonna happen."

"Of course something's gonna happen, this is Mike and El we're talking about."

El slowly raised her head off of Mike, while he put his arm back to his side. They turned around to see the guilty faces of their three best friends.

"What are you doing here?!" Mike whispered angrily at the boys.

"We're watching a movie. What does it look like?" Lucas retorted.

Will ignored him, "I swear it was their idea."

"Hey!"

A few people around them shushed them to be quiet.

"Are you seriously spying on us?"

"There wasn't much to spy on," Dustin replied, then gestured to Mike's arm, now practically glued to his side, "Well, except for that."

Mike and El both flushed a dark red, embarrassed the boys had caught their unplanned moment.

"Shut up!"

"Shhh!" A mother a few seats down scowled at them, with her two children looking over.

"If you're here, you might as well join us." The three boys grinned, starting to climb over the seats to get to the empty spots next to Mike and Eleven.

El eyed around them, watching for any workers, “You’re gonna get us all kicked out.”

Surprisingly, no worker came over to yell at them. Dustin plopped himself into the seat next to Mike, while Lucas and Will went next to El.

“I can’t believe you guys.” Mike rolled his eyes, still glad the darkness of the theater concealed his blush.

The five friends watched the rest of the movie together, Mike and El’s “date” was interrupted and forgotten. However, it didn’t take long for their hands to find each other, lacing their fingers together, keeping them grounded to one another. Even as Lucas gave his commentary on the movie, and Dustin reached over to grab handfuls of popcorn, to Mike and El, they were completely alone.

All that mattered to them were their hands clasping onto each other. They completely tuned out everything around them, all the noises and laughter faded. Because in that moment, nothing else mattered but each other.

Their blushes still hadn’t faded from earlier, and they were still confused why a swarm of butterflies had erupted inside their stomachs. But right now, they ignored it. All they cared about were their hands, connecting them and bringing them to their own separate world.

Mike remembered reading once that a group of butterflies were called a kaleidoscope. In that moment, the name seemed to fit perfectly. He wasn’t sure why, but El was bringing all these butterflies to him, and his entire world was like a kaleidoscope. His mind felt jumbled, filled with colors and beauty and light, it was as if he was taken to a whole new universe.

And through that kaleidoscope, the only thing Mike could focus on was her.

4. Pink Lights, Pink Blush

“No, no, no way! I am *not* doing that!”

“Come on, it's fun! I used to go with Steve all the time!”

Mike let out a grumble. Leave it to Nancy to call him on a Monday night demanding he bring El to the Hawkins Roller Rink's couples night.

“It's half-off for all couples on Wednesday nights, and I swear it's a lot of fun,” Nancy insisted, despite Mike's protests, “You'll have a good time. At least think about it.”

Mike rolled his eyes, “Fine. I'll think about it.”

That was how Mike and El found themselves at the Hawkins Roller Rink, with skates and leg warmers ready for what Nancy vowed would be a night of fun.

“You know I've never gone roller skating before,” El pointed out as she lifted her foot onto the bench to tie the laces.

“I haven't either, but I mean, how hard could it be?”

Within five minutes, Mike regretted saying that. It was much harder than he had ever imagined. He and El had to link arms as they waddled to the rink, barely making it that far without falling over.

When they stepped into the rink, Mike immediately slid over to the wall, almost crashing into it before he steadied himself. El followed a couple seconds behind.

“Okay, so *maybe* this is a little harder than I thought,” He gulped, earning a giggle from El.

They managed to make a full lap around the rink without falling. However, they both kept their hands on the wall the entire time, not daring to remove them for a second, moving nudge by nudge forward.

"Enough," Mike exclaimed, once they made it around their first lap, "We're not gonna get any better if we keep clinging onto the wall, let's go."

He held out his hand, signaling for El to grab it. She eyed him suspiciously for a second.

"Just hold onto my hand, we'll be fine. If we're feeling unsteady we can just hold onto each other."

Right as Mike said that, a voice echoed through the room telling everyone to clear the rink for couple's skate. A pink light was then projected over the rink.

El grinned at him, and reached out for his hand, "I guess it's our time."

"Yeah," Mike blushed.

So together they pushed off from the wall, clinging onto each other's hands. Truth be told, things were shaky at first. Every few seconds one of them began to slip, but when they did, they reached out for each other, their arms were always there. When El felt herself begin to fall, she just reached out and Mike was there, clutching onto her arm, to give her an anchor to hold on to. And if she fell, she knew he was right there to catch her.

Mike just tried to focus on his feet. He'd made Nancy give explicit instructions on how to roller skate, and he imagined her words in his mind. One step at a time, he was determined not to fall over like a complete klutz.

Soon enough, they began to get the hang of it. Their feet began to sync up, first the left, then the right together, they moved together as a unit. Their shakiness started to ease. They could have let go of each other's hands, but they had completely forgotten they were even holding on.

Mike had stopped staring at the ground and instead looked up. He looked at all the bright lights dancing on the rink, he looks at all the couples circling around in unison, and mostly, he looked at El.

She was laughing at their adventure, and her smile was the only thing Mike could really see. The pink lights around them seemed to shine directly onto her, like she was some angel being clouded by all the light of Heaven. The pink illuminated her brown eyes, making them shine in a way that Mike couldn't look away from.

And even though Mike was positive that whoever was in charge of these lights was making sure they pointed directly at El, part of him believed that she herself was the light.

There were dozens of people in the rink at that moment, but to Mike, El seemed to be the sun of the room. All the light seemed to come straight from her smile.

The sun was supposed to be dangerous. People wore sunscreen to avoid sunburn, sunglasses were sold to block the light. Mike remembered when he was younger, all those summer days where his mother insisted if he kept staring at the sun he was going to ruin his vision. Yet he couldn't stop staring at the magnificent light ahead of him, even when it hurt his eyes, it was too mesmerizing to look away.

That was how Mike felt staring at El. He knew she wasn't a real sun, he knew that no harm would ever come out of staring at her, but the way she lit everything up around him was too enthralling to ever turn away from. As the pink light danced over her, and they continued to skate around the rink, Mike was captivated by El's light.

El, however, was unaware of Mike's gaze. Mike himself wasn't able to register why he was so transfixed on her. He wasn't sure what about her enchanted him so or why he couldn't ever look away, but for now, he didn't worry about it. All he cared about was how he stared at El, he didn't have time to question his hypnosis.

That was until he felt his skate sliding from underneath his legs, too quickly for him to grab El's arm to steady himself. Before he knew what had happened, he found himself with his back on the ground.

"Mike! Are you okay?" El exclaimed, bending down next to him.

Mike had now broken out of his trance, and a blush crept up his

cheeks upon seeing El, “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.” He rubbed the back of his neck nervously.

“Are you sure?” She seemed concerned, but Mike could see the hints at a smile desperate to break free on her cheeks.

When he nodded his head, her smile did escape, along with a fit of giggles at Mike’s clumsiness, “Come on, mouthbreather.”

She reached out her hand for him, bending her knees down. Before he could reach for her, however, her skates began to slide uncontrollably. Without Mike’s arm to grab onto, El found herself landing right next to him on the roller rink floor.

Mike let out a series of chucking at her spot next to him. For a second, she tried to give him her signature evil eye to shut him up, but soon she fell into her own hysterics as well.

Together they lied back onto the floor, cackling at their predicament. They had spent the whole night so terrified of falling, but now that they had fallen, it no longer felt so scary. Mike and El were still right there with each other, ready to pick one another up.

Then the pink light swept over them once again, and Mike swore it must have been hypnotic. His laughter faded, and soon El’s did too. All they could do was stare at each other, the light shining in their faces as people skated past them.

A gravity seemed to be pulling them together, that was the explanation Mike had given it. Gravity must have been what was pulling his face closer to El’s in that moment. He had no idea what was about to happen, and frankly, he didn’t want to overthink it. All he knew was he was moving closer to El, and she was moving closer to him, and the light dancing around them began to feel like magic.

“Hey, get up! Couple’s skate is over!” A small boy stepped into the rink, screaming at the pair on the floor. The pink light disappeared from the rink, and people began to fill up the place once again.

Mike and El jumped apart, blushing down their necks, unsure of what was just about to happen and not wanting to question it.

So together they pulled each other back up, and whatever moment was about to happen on that roller rink floor, they skated away from it all.

5. The Flowers

Mike woke up the next morning with a goofy grin plastered onto his face, the memories of the previous night rushing back to him. The images of the pink lights of the roller rink couldn't help but make him smile. He had to admit, Nancy was right, that was really fun.

He made his way downstairs, grabbing a quick breakfast before he left for school. Karen was standing by the kitchen counter, arranging a small bouquet of tulips in a vase.

"How was your date last night?" Karen had gone to sleep early the previous night, and had not had a chance to see Mike after he came home.

Mike dropped his fork upon hearing her say that, he had completely forgotten his roller rink adventure with El was technically a date, "Good," He responded, looking down at his eggs. He wanted to change the topic away from his 'date', "What are the flowers for?"

"Oh, I just thought some flowers could brighten up the house. Speaking of which, I bought a second bouquet I was going to send to Nancy, but it would probably die by the time it got to her. Do you want me to drop it off for El today from you?"

Mike looked up at her. He couldn't exactly say no, not without raising suspicion, his mother did think El was his girlfriend after all, "Um, uh, sure," He stood up and walked over to the second bouquet lying sideways on the counter. He picked up the blank piece of paper to leave a note on, and quickly scribbled out an explanation for her. He didn't want any confusion or awkwardness when she saw he was sending her flowers. His biggest concern with their plan was that it would create any awkwardness between them.

So far things seemed to be fine. Well, there was that one moment last night. Right after they had fallen on the floor, there was a second where Mike swore they were leaning. But then that young boy came and interrupted them.

Mike didn't know what to think about that. He couldn't deny the fact,

it was like they were about to kiss, but that made no sense. He couldn't wrap his mind around it, why would he go to kiss El? He was only fake dating her after all. He tried to push the thought to the back of his mind. After their interruption, they had stood back up and continued skating in an embarrassed silence for a few minutes, both too preoccupied with their own blushes to think about anything else. After a few minutes they started to warm up to each other again, but that awkwardness wasn't something Mike ever wanted to relive.

After he finished scribbling his message to El, his mother interrupted his thoughts once again, "Have you made any plans with her for Thanksgiving this year?"

"What do you mean? I figured she and the guys are just coming over for dinner like always."

"Well, you can still do that, but things are different this year. You should do something special with her for the holiday, remind each other how thankful you are for one another," Mike couldn't contain his blush at that, of course he was thankful for El, but the way his mother said it just made his entire face heat up, "I can make reservations for you two at La Vigne this Saturday, does that sound good?"

La Vigne was an upscale French restaurant in Hawkins. Mike had never been there before, but he knew his parents had went for their anniversary last year. The small eatery had a reputation for being one of the most romantic date locations in town, which wasn't exactly a fact that helped stop Mike's nerves that things between he and El would become awkward. But once again, it wasn't like he could say no without having to come up with lies to answer his mother's questions, "Uh, sure, sounds good."

Not wanting to hear Karen's response, Mike quickly shoved the last bite of eggs down his throat, and raced out the door to get to school.

Eleven didn't wake up until almost two o'clock. It wasn't like her to sleep in so much, even though she didn't go to school with the boys, Hopper still woke her up at a normal time most days. But Hopper had

let her sleep in today, he knew she was up late the previous night.

What Hopper hadn't known, though, was the reason El was up so late. When she was out with Mike, she could keep herself distracted for the most part. He kept her in the moment, away from the deep place in her mind that she went to once she was alone at home. Once she had lied down in her bed that night, she couldn't help but overthink about what had happened.

That one moment with Mike had haunted her mind into the deep hours of the night. She had to figure out what was about to happen. Her mind immediately brushed aside any thoughts that they were about to kiss, she thought that was ridiculous. She didn't want to kiss Mike, and he surely didn't want to kiss her. It must have been something else, but what was happening that seemed to be pushing their faces together on that roller rink floor?

She thought about that moment obsessively, until finally sleep came and took her away from her mania. She woke up the next morning and had made the decision to push away any thoughts of last night. She was thinking too much about one little thing, she should focus on the present instead.

She left her bedroom when something on the table caught her eye. A small bouquet of purple tulips were quickly shoved into a vase, and El's curiosity was sparked. Who in her family had gotten flowers? Hopper and Joyce weren't exactly the kind of couple to buy flowers for each other, and though El wasn't the most involved in her brother's love life, she didn't know of anyone who might send flowers to Will.

She went up to the bouquet, examining them closely, and gasped when she saw the note resting there. Right on the front it clearly said her name, and the flowers were from Mike. El smiled brightly at the tulips. Impromptu gift-giving wasn't unordinary for Mike and El, they often sent each other little surprises to each other, just small things that reminded them of one another, or anything to make the other happy. Yet as much as they did it, the amazement never wore off, and El still shined whenever she saw these surprises from Mike.

Carefully she plucked the the note out of the flowers, and unfolded it

to read the message inside. That's when her smile dropped. The piece of paper, with Mike's messy writing, clearly read:

"My mom wanted me to send these to you. For the plan and all, you know"

El could feel as her grin faded off her face. The flowers were just another pawn in the game they had created, it shouldn't surprise her. El didn't know why it created such an uneasy feeling in her stomach. Sure, she had expected the tulips to mean something more, but she didn't even know what she had wanted "more" to be. Mike had still sent her these, what about the flowers being for the plan changed that fact?

El couldn't place what exactly was the cause of her disappointment, but she tried to push it to the back of her mind. This was just another addition of the list of things to do with Mike that El wanted to ignore because she couldn't figure out her feelings behind them. Maybe if she hadn't brushed aside that list, maybe if she had looked at it as a whole, then maybe it wouldn't be so confusing. Maybe she would see the pattern that could make everything begin to make sense, but that wasn't what happened.

Someday El would understand why that message had disappointed her so, and she would also learn exactly what was happening at the roller rink that night, but that day wasn't today. She pushed all thoughts of Mike out of her brain, and continued on with her day.

Mike only spent ten minutes pacing in his room before his "date" with El to La Vigne that Saturday. His mother had insisted he dress up for the day, so he was wearing the suit he had worn to his cousin's wedding two years ago. Since then he had grown several inches, so the suit was slightly too small, making him uncomfortable enough, but in reality, the suit wasn't even comparable to the thing bothering him the most.

He felt beads of sweat form everywhere from his forehead to his palms, his anxiety was worsening by the second. He didn't have the time to question why he was so anxious about this, it was just El after

all, but going to this fancy, romantic place, Mike thought he would vomit.

When they arrived at La Vigne, it did nothing to ease his nerves. The restaurant was small, and since it was a Saturday night, the entire place was packed. Couples sat at every table, smiling and holding hands, Mike wasn't sure if he wanted to blend in like that with El, or if the very thought terrified him.

He spent a solid five minutes once they took their seats doing nothing but looking around the restaurant, trying to find where any of the lights were. The chandelier in the center of the room seemed to be just for aesthetic purposes, with no light coming from it at all. Soon enough, Mike concluded that the only light source he could find were the hundreds of candles that flooded all around the restaurant. He tried to ignore how much a fire hazard that must be, instead thinking about his candlelit dinner with his fake girlfriend.

"Mike, are you okay?" El had caught on to Mike's dilemma, she asked him with raised eyebrows and a concerned expression. Mike looked up at her, and seeing her face, illuminated by the candlelight, with such delicate features and a kind presence, it didn't help his raising anxiety.

He didn't have a clue what about this setting, what about just being here with El, was overwhelming him so much, but Mike needed it to stop, "Yeah, I'm fine. Just a little, uh, distracted. That's all."

He reached out for the glass in front of him, desperate for some water. He was getting dehydrated from all the sweating.

The glass was almost to his lips when he heard El exclaim, "Mike, no!" His arm had stopped in place and Mike looked down, an embarrassed blush erupting over his face.

That was not his glass of water in his hand, instead he had reached out and picked up the candle from right off the table. The small flame was inches from his mouth when El stopped him.

He could feel his blush spreading down his neck, complete embarrassment taking over him. El wiped the blood from under her

nose from when she used her powers to stop his arm in place.

“Uh, thanks” He gave a shy smile.

Mike could see El was trying to contain her smirk at him, “Of course.”

After a few moments of silence, El spoke up again, “So, um, how’s your new campaign coming?”

With that one sentence, Mike’s fears seemed to wash away. He was instantly grateful to have something to tell her about. He had been working on a new campaign for several weeks now, and it had become highly anticipated within their friends, but Mike was going all out. He was making sure that it was their biggest campaign yet, and the secrets had been given total security. He wasn’t letting any spoilers leak out on what it would be about, not for anyone.

Well, except for El. She always seemed to be the exception for Mike. He would share all his campaign ideas with her, he’d tell her absolutely everything, while sharing nothing to the boys until the day came. El didn’t like to play Dungeons & Dragons like the other boys did, she preferred to watch them play and get excited about it. Mike insisted that was the reason she got previews at all of the campaigns. The boys, on the other hand, didn’t believe that whatsoever. For years they had teased him that he only told her because he was too in love to keep any secrets from her, even small campaign secrets.

Deep down, Mike knew the exact reason why he would tell El, though he would never admit it to the boys. They would interpret it their own way, and Mike didn’t think it needed to be read into so much. He just loved to see her smile, and he saw how she would light up when he told her all about the latest adventures going on in his newest story. When he was playing the campaign, he was the Dungeon Master, he had an act to put on and he couldn’t spend the entire game watching El’s reactions, no matter how much he wanted to.

So Mike began to treasure these small moments, telling El all about the campaigns, and watching as she would get so excited hearing about it. What Mike didn’t know, however, was that El really cared

nothing for the campaigns. But when she saw with how much passion Mike told his stories, she couldn't help but light up while listening to him.

They talked about the campaign for a while, and then Mike told her about what had been going on at school the last few days, then she shared all about what she had been doing since she last saw him. It was always easy for them to fall into conversation together. Mike was talkative, and El was a generally quiet person, but around Mike she always opened up. They were so invested in each other's lives, they always had something to tell one another.

Soon enough, the waiter came over and delivered their food. They stopped talking for a few minutes and started to eat, and in those few moments, Mike thought about the restaurant once again. He remembered when he came in, and noticing how dark the room was, with the light coming from seemingly nowhere but the candles. He had to revise that idea, though, because the restaurant didn't seem so dark anymore. As he looked at El, everything seemed to light up around him.

Mike could never understand why places like this restaurant were considered romantic. What about the candlelight or the dimness of the room conveyed romance? When he had walked into La Vigne, the place didn't scream love, not to him. The darkness just seemed depressing and boring. Mike didn't think that's what love should be. Love should be light, excitement, happiness, none of the things this so-called romantic place possessed.

Mike thought that a place so dark shouldn't be considered romantic itself, but maybe the darkness just created the opportunity for romance. Maybe those dimly lit candles just gave people a chance to light up the room themselves.

And in that moment, without even realizing it, as Mike and El laughed and smiled together, the place didn't seem so sullen anymore. They lit it up for one another.

Mike decided to set aside his thoughts for now, focusing only on the shining girl in front of him. They fell back into conversation, not questioning how every second, the world seemed to get a little

brighter.

That was until a waiter came over, holding a large bouquet of roses.

“Would you like to buy a rose for your girlfriend?”

Mike felt his face flush, “Oh, uh, she’s not my-- Um, no thank you.”

Silence returned for a few seconds, while Mike and El both tried to will their blushes away. Mike’s hands started fumbling with the tablecloth, a nervous habit of his, and he tried to suppress the questions of why the waiter thought they were a couple. Eleven was his best friend, they made each other happy, and now they were at this romantic restaurant, it had to be ordinary for the waiter to assume that, right?

“Thank you, by the way.”

“What?” Mike looked up at her, eyebrows furrowing.

“For the flowers the other day. The tulips, they were really nice.” El felt her face heat up, the memory of the flowers coming back to her. She hadn’t thought about them since that morning she had found them, and she still hadn’t figured out why it disappointed her so much to know it was for the plan.

“Oh, that. It’s nothing. My mom bought them for Nancy, but then realized they would die. So she gave them to me to gi-”

El cut off his babbling by grabbing his hand across the table, “Mike.” He looked over at her, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” He responded, giving her a shy smile.

“So, uh, how’s AV Club?” She asked him, “Did you get that new radio?”

Mike brightened up instantly at the reminder of AV Club. His teacher had managed to get them a brand new ham radio, and he was enthusiastic about it.

He pulled his hands to the front of him, making big gestures to show

his excitement, only he didn't realize he was still fidgeting with the tablecloth.

"Yeah we-"

He was cut off by the sound of clattering of plates and glasses onto the ground. Embarrassment filled through his veins, and it took him a second to process what had just happened. He had forgotten to let go of the tablecloth before he pulled his hands away. Now the tablecloth was ripped completely off the table, and all the items on the table had now clanged onto the floor.

His food had spilled all over his suit, and stunned silence took over the restaurant. Everyone turned to look towards the noise, and Mike wished he could disappear from that moment, he wished he could turn invisible and get as far away from there as possible.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," He exclaimed to the waiter a few tables from him. Mike looked over at El. Her mouth was gaping open, and she looked just as embarrassed as he did.

After a few seconds, the shock had worn away, and anger had replaced it in the waiter. He started to angrily scream at them in French. Mike had taken one year of French his freshman year, and though he couldn't catch everything the waiter yelled, he could grasp enough to hear the man shouting for them to get out.

Mike pulled a wad of money out of his wallet and dropped it onto the table, then grabbed El by the hand and raced with her out of the restaurant. He could hear the man grumbling behind them.

Mike and El continued to run until they got to Mike's car in the parking lot. Somewhere along the way, they started to laugh as they ran. When they got to the car, Mike dropped her hand and unlocked the door, and they plopped down inside, giggling all the way.

He couldn't bring himself to start the ignition, rather wanting to just sit there for a few minutes. He didn't want this moment to end, he wanted to freeze this second, sitting in his car with El by his side, laughing after they just got kicked out of the snobby upscale restaurant. He wanted to freeze it and live it forever.

When their laughter faded, all they needed was to look at each other and they would burst out into giggles once again.

Soon enough, Mike regained the ability to speak, "Did you see the look on his face?!"

"Him? What about the lady next to us?!"

They spent the next few minutes cracking up with each other, bringing up their favorite reactions to Mike's mess. After a couple minutes, Mike saw she was shivering, wearing a short-sleeved dress in the November weather. Without hesitation, he took off his suit jacket and put it around her. El didn't think anything of it, she was used to taking Mike's jackets to keep herself warm. Mike didn't care, he always insisted she needed them more than he did.

They continued to snicker at their ordeal the entire ride home, and when Mike pulled up in front of El's house, he really wished the night didn't have to end.

He got out of the car and ran around to open her door for her. She responded with a smile, taking his hand as she stepped out of the station wagon.

"Well, uh," Mike's familiar shy smile plastered itself across his face, and his hand went to rub the back of his neck, "I had a fun time tonight."

"I did too," A dazed smile took over El's face, and for a few seconds it was as if she was hypnotized, she couldn't bear to look away from him. But then the noise of a dog barking down the road snapped her out of it, and her trance ended. She looked at Mike, almost sadly, like something in that moment wasn't right, "I guess I have to go now."

"I guess you do."

"Goodnight Mike," She looked up at him expectedly. She wasn't sure what she was waiting for, but something about the way he looked in the moonlight, with the grin he was giving her, with the way they had laughed together the entire ride home, she just didn't feel like the night was really over. It felt like there needed to be some grand

finish, like there was something important missing from their goodbye.

“Goodnight El.”

He stared at her for a moment, and El knew he could feel it too. How if she left now, the night would be unfinished, it would be missing some important ending. But he looked at her and she stared back, and nothing happened, so she had to accept it was really time for her to leave.

She squeezed his hand and gave one more small smile before letting go. She turned around and walked back to her house. Mike just watched as she walked away, until suddenly she stopped in her tracks, turning back around to look at him.

He raised his eyebrows at her and she just called back to him, “Your jacket.”

Mike then realized she was still wearing the jacket he had given her, and as she walked back over to him, as he got those few extra seconds talking to her, he was never as grateful for his jacket as he was in that moment.

El took the jacket off and gave it back to Mike, her hands lingering on his for just a second extra. When she took it off, Mike noticed something. A large stain had made its way over the lap of her dress, from when his blunder had caused their food to spill all over them.

“El, your dress, I’m so sorry,” He gestured towards the stain, and she looked down, having not noticed it before, yet her smile didn’t falter a bit.

“It’s okay. It’s just a dress, it doesn’t matter.”

Mike smiled at her, and she gave him a shy grin back. El knew she should turn around, she should go inside and let the night end. But she couldn’t do that, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was supposed to happen right now. Even if something wasn’t supposed to happen, the relief she felt when she realized she still had his jacket, that the night wasn’t over for another minute or so, that

she still had a *chance*, the relief was indescribable. El wasn't sure what exactly she had a chance for, but turning around and going back to Mike, it felt like everything in the world was coming together.

As the two stared at each other, El decided that if she didn't know what she wanted to happen, then she needed to stop thinking about it. She didn't know what she felt should happen, so if she was going to let it happen, she had to follow her impulses.

So in that moment under the night sky, Eleven turned off her mind. She turned off all her thoughts and worries and she didn't stop to think about her actions. She decided to follow her impulses, to do what the moment was telling her to do.

She got up onto her toes and leaned into Mike. She wasn't even sure what she was doing, but there was time to overthink her actions later. Mike's eyes widened as she planted a quick kiss onto his cheek.

When she pulled away she attempted to hide the scarlet blush erupting on her face. She would go on to overanalyze her actions later, but in that moment, all that mattered to her was the dopey grin that had overtaken Mike's face.

"Bye Mike," El breathed out, before turning around and walking to her front door, finally feeling content with how the night was ending.

It took Mike a few seconds to really comprehend what had happened, and it wasn't until she was already halfway to the door that he finally snapped out of the trance she had put him in, "Night El!" He called out after her.

His goofy expression didn't go away for hours after that, and as he played with his keys while walked back to his car, Mike couldn't imagine a better way his night could have gone.

6. Now or Never

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry it's taken me so long to update, I've been extremely busy these past few weeks and I haven't had any time to write. Now, here's a pretty long chapter, I hope you enjoy!

It had been almost a week since Mike and El saw each other again. After what had happened at the end of their dinner date, they were both too embarrassed to see each other again. Mike threw himself into school and planning his next campaign, and El focused on studying and helping everyone get ready for Thanksgiving.

Karen Wheeler was grateful for El's help. Every year she hosted Thanksgiving dinner at her house, inviting all her children's friend's families over as well, and she always seemed to run herself thin planning. So El came over in the mornings, helping her with grocery shopping and organizing recipes and cooking the food, just making sure she had an excuse why she needed to leave before Mike came home at 3:15.

Late-nights became common for El, not being able to fall asleep, getting up 10 times a night because she claimed she needed water, and it was all for one reason.

The memory of their kiss kept replaying in her mind. Why had she done that? El wished she could take it back, it was a spur-of-the-moment decision that was now bound to create a new level of weirdness between her and Mike.

She tried to justify why she had done it. El tried to brush it aside, they were on their dinner "date," it was tradition to give a kiss good night. That's why she felt the need to give Mike that quick peck, it wasn't because she wanted to or anything, it was just a tradition that it felt weird to do without.

Any further thoughts of the kiss were shut down, El insisted it meant nothing more. It was just a quick peck on the cheek, that wasn't an

uncommon thing. Friends kissed each other on the cheeks all the time, and that's all she and Mike were. Friends, just two good friends who happened to kiss each other on the cheek on occasion.

Mike and El couldn't avoid each other forever, though, and on Thanksgiving evening they finally faced each other once again.

When the doorbell rang, Mike knew it was her. Well, he swore it was her the last two times the bell had rung, but then it turned out to just be Dustin and Lucas' families, but this time he was sure, it was her on the other side of the door.

His father yelled at him to go get the door, and in that moment, Mike wasn't sure if he wanted to run to see her, or to run away. The thought of hiding himself away in the basement was becoming more and more appealing with every step he took towards the door.

Taking a deep breath, when he got to the door his hand slowly reached towards the knob, turning it as slow as he possibly could. He felt the door open and swung it out.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" Joyce exclaimed when she saw him. Mike stared out at the family before him, five faces looking towards him, but there was only one that had his attention. El smiled when she saw him looking at her, then looked away almost instantly, a blush forming at her cheeks.

Mike eventually snapped out of his daze looking at El, bringing his attention back to the rest of the family waiting outside, "Happy Thanksgiving, uh, come in!" He moved out of the way so they could come in, all but one person. El stayed out there on his front porch, looking at Mike expectantly.

"Hi."

"Hey."

"So, uh, what's up? What's been going on with you lately?" Mike reached behind himself to rub the back of his neck. He had spent the past hour trying to figure out what to say to El when he saw her, anything that wouldn't make him seem like a bashful mess, but now

that she was right there in front of him, Mike didn't have a clue.

El's cheeks were a deep scarlet, and she looked away from Mike's eyes, "I've been busy. A lot's been happening getting ready for the holiday."

"Yeah, I've, uh, been really busy too, with school and stuff." El looked up at him, suppressing a small smile, "Aren't you cold? Come in."

Mike ushered El into the house, quickly taking her jacket for her. The boys were in the basement, and Mike almost had an impulse to grab El by the hand and drag her down there, but stopped himself. Holding her hand would only cause more awkwardness, he could lead her there without clutching her hand as he went.

Together they descended down the steps to the basement to find their friends. A short while later they were called up for dinner. The normal Wheeler dining room table now had two fold-up tables added onto each end, making room for the amount of guests.

When everyone had all sat around the table, Mike wasn't surprised to hear his mother's voice piping up, with the same question she dragged out of everyone on every Thanksgiving, "So what is everyone thankful for?"

One by one everyone went around the table, sharing the same clichés as always, until it was Mike's turn. He took a deep breath, ready to share the same spiel he did every year, "I'm so thankful for all my friends and family, and for having everyone here tonight."

Mike looked over to El besides him, and thought back to the only Thanksgiving where he really understood those words. He was endlessly grateful for all the people he loved, but Mike never understood why he was supposed to feel that thankfulness today more than any other day. Of course, the Thanksgiving of 1984 was a different story. El had come back less than a month ago, and in those few short weeks, Mike's entire world felt like it was finally falling back into place. Before he knew it, Thanksgiving was upon them, and it was El's first. On that chilly November night, Mike thought back to a year earlier, when he spent the entire night fighting with himself.

He knew he was a lucky kid, and he had so many people he loved in his life. He had so much to be thankful for, but on that fateful night in 1983, he couldn't help but think, *what's the point without El?* Mike had spent all of that Thanksgiving just wishing there was one specific person to be thankful for, but instead all he had was her memory.

Then she came back, and Thanksgiving in 1984 was a different story. The shock of El's reappearance hadn't yet passed, and that Thanksgiving, Mike was truly grateful for once. He got to see how she experienced the holiday for the first time, and he knew the concept was important to her. El didn't have the easiest life, but in those past few weeks, things were finally getting better for her. She had more to be thankful for than anyone else at that table. So when Mike gave the same spiel he did every year, he really appreciated those words. He was so thankful for having *everyone* there at the table that night.

Mike started to get lost in his thoughts, staring at El and thinking back to those past Thanksgivings. He snapped out of it when he heard Lucas clearing his throat across the table, sporting a playful smirk, "Really Mike? That's *all* you're thankful for this year?"

"Yeah, are you sure nothing specific has happened in the last few weeks, nothing that you're particularly grateful for?" Dustin joined in too, snickering and gesturing his head towards El, while Mike just blushed.

He felt his entire face heating up, and the unreasonable part of Mike's brain yelled at him to hide under the table so he didn't have to face his friends' teasings, but instead he took a deep breath, preparing himself for the speech he knew he had to make, "And, uh, this year I'm especially grateful for El. We've only been dating a few weeks now, but she makes me so happy, and yeah, I'm so thankful to have her in my life."

Dustin and Lucas were apparently content with that, no longer torturing Mike to say more.

"Hey Mike, Christmas is the mistletoe holiday, not Thanksgiving," Lucas sniggered, and Mike wanted to hide his face. He didn't dare look at El now, but he was sure she was blushing nearly as much as

he was. Luckily, Joyce went next, and the attention was taken off Mike.

Dinner went by quickly, everyone devoured into their food, it was Karen's amazing cooking after all. Everyone laughed and shared stories, and in that moment, El really understood why Thanksgiving was her favorite holiday. All those feelings of love and home and familiarity-- all the things she had been deprived of for so long, they always made their appearance on Thanksgiving, while she sat by the Wheeler dining room with all the people she loved around her.

Desserts came out soon, and El's mouth watered at the sight of Karen's signature blueberry pie. She remembered Karen showing her the recipe earlier that week, saying that it was an old family secret, but El was practically family already, and to El's blush, that she was sure El would be a Wheeler herself one day.

"Mike, can you pass the pie." She nudged his arm.

"Sure thing," He responded, reaching for the pie, and without thinking, "Sweetie pie."

It took them both a moment to register what he said, but when it clicked, they both burst out laughing. All the other people at the table turned to look at them, wondering what was making the duo howl, but Mike and El were cackling too hard at Mike's weak pun to notice.

Mike saw their friends raising their eyebrows at them, but he couldn't be bothered to explain.

Lucas started to question them, only making them laugh harder. Eventually everyone ignored them, and their laughter began to slow down. Everyone at the table ignored them, that was just Mike and El, always off in their own little world, with just each other there for company. Whatever was going on in their little corner of the universe, it was just meant for the two chuckling teens. Because even if Mike and El didn't realize it quite yet, there's a special word for what that's like, for having your own world with someone else, away from everyone else you know, even when they're just a few feet away. Soon the realization of that word would begin to seep in, but

for now, their only thoughts were of the growing list of ridiculous jokes that wouldn't make most laugh, but coming from one another, it was everything.

After dinner, everyone scattered to the living room, chatting and laughing. Mike was sitting in his father's La-Z Boy, watching as his mother shared all the old family stories he'd heard hundreds of times now, but still listening and smiling along like it was the first time.

Music was playing softly, it was one of his father's old records that he couldn't recognize, when the adults began to stand up, dancing in the center of the room. He lost himself in thought for a second, before he felt a nudge to his side.

El was standing there next to him, reaching her hand out, "Wanna dance?"

Mike didn't answer, instead just giving her a smirk and grabbing her hand. They walked to the center of the living room, and Mike put his arms around her back, and hers went around his neck. El rested her head on Mike's shoulders and they began to sway to the music.

Mike closed his eyes, thinking back to the first time he danced with El. She had just come home after a year of separation, and Mike knew there weren't many things he could control. That was a hard truth to accept, to finally realize how powerless he was. He couldn't save her from the Upside Down, he couldn't guarantee things would always be safe, he couldn't take all of El's pain away. There were some things he just couldn't promise, but he was determined that no matter what, he would go the furthest of his powers to make things better. He could protect her from the bad memories of the Upside Down, he could do his best to keep things safe, he would be there to take away as much of her pain as he could.

And he could keep whatever promises he could. So when Eleven came back in the fall of 1984, Mike insisted that this year they could go to the eighth grade Snow Ball. In his basement, he taught El how to dance, and it was messy and flawed, but it was perfect-- just like them. He may have stepped on her feet a few too many times, but

even still, they laughed through it.

Then the news hit. The school had budget cuts, and the Snow Ball was being cancelled that year. The frustration and powerlessness Mike felt at that was uncomparable. El had been gone for a year, she had been through so much, and Mike didn't know what to do. He felt so powerless, and now the one thing he thought he could do, the one promise he could keep, was being ripped away from him.

They didn't go to the Snow Ball that year, or any other year. Mike would never forgive himself for breaking that promise. Now all they had were those memories of dancing in the basement, the closest they could ever get to the promise that once meant the entire universe to them.

Now here they were, dancing once again, but this time was different. No expectations, no plans, nothing but the feeling of dancing together.

Mike looked down at El, staring for a second, thinking back to that night so many years ago, a giddy feeling blossoming in his chest. El lifted up her head, looking back at him, and Mike gulped. He felt his heart start to speed up, and he didn't understand why, but once again he was hit with a feeling that in that moment, something was supposed to happen.

He didn't realize he and El were getting closer together, and he started to tune out everything around them. Mike was always a chatty person, always having a million thoughts in his head, overflowing from his brain and out his mouth. It wasn't often that he was ever completely speechless, but right now he was more than that. There wasn't a single thought in Mike's head, he just stared into El's eyes, and he swore it felt like he was floating. He felt like their dancing had suddenly taken them to the sky and he was floating with her. He didn't think, he couldn't think, because there was nothing he had to think about.

Some mysterious force was pulling them closer together, and Mike didn't try to explain it. For once, he wasn't scared or questioning, he was at peace with everything around him.

Their lips touched softly, a gentle kiss that didn't compare to what

was happening inside Mike's mind. As soon as El's lips touched his, it was as if fireworks had gone off in his mind, the sound of a boom vibrating through him. It was like he had been asleep, and now he was finally awake, alert for the first time.

When they kissed, Mike felt himself get hit was a rushing vision. Images flashed through his mind, imaginations of what could have been.

Mike had thought about this before, but never so seriously, so longingly. Visions were now pouring from his brain, showing him where his life could have been like if the Snow Ball of 1984 was never cancelled.

He saw himself standing at the bottom of his stairs, watching as El descended. Her hair was still short, and she wore a blue dress, and Mike couldn't look away.

He saw himself in the middle school gym, swaying with El, her forehead resting on his as her face wore a bright smile that he wished would never fade.

He saw himself running towards Mr. Clarke's room, El holding onto his hand. They had snuck out of the gym, wanting to talk on their own for a bit.

He saw himself sitting in his old science desk, looking down before taking a leap of faith. He suddenly pushed himself forward, landing his lips onto El's.

He saw himself dressed formally, walking up to El's front door, waiting to pick her up for their first official date.

He saw himself walking on the train tracks, El was hopping behind him. He watched her for a moment, grinning before he couldn't hold back what he was trying to say anymore, "I love you."

Finally, he saw himself today. Mike saw himself sitting on the couch on Thanksgiving, El curled up to his side. No messiness, no confusion, no debates of feelings, he just saw the two of them lying there, happy and in love.

Mike jolted out of his visions, pulling away from the kiss with a gasp. He stopped, realizing for a second where he was, what had really happened in the past. His mind was racing with the fantasies his imagination just brought up, struck with the realization of what could have been, and how much he wished that all had happened.

Mike looked down at El, his heart beating 300 times a minute, and he wished how much he could change the past. Mike suddenly yearned to be able to go back in time to when he was 13 years old, getting ready for the Snow Ball with El, to do something while he still had a chance.

Mike looked down at his best friend, and suddenly realized how hopelessly in love he was with her. He spent so many years denying all this, so many years he wished now he could take back, but you can't run from love. Things could have turned out so differently, Mike could be happy with Eleven now, he wouldn't need to deal with the mess of emotions he was only now understanding. So, Mike tried to ignore all this, he tried to push aside how good things could have been if he only did something back all those years ago, and only thought about the present, and what he wanted to do right now.

And all Mike wanted to do right now was to kiss El again, God he wanted to kiss her so many more times, but he really only cared about the next one.

Bittersweet is how you could describe their next kiss. Mike pulled El up to him, kissing her once more, putting all the passion and feelings he couldn't put into words into the kiss instead. Deep down, he knew it was hopeless. He knew he couldn't change the past, to go back to a different time and kiss El then, to bring him to where he wanted to be in the present. But he could kiss her now, and now was better than never.

When she felt Mike pulling her up to him, she gasped. When his lips hit hers once more, she swore her brain short circuited. She kissed him back, the realization of why she wanted this so bad slowly seeping into her.

Eleven was never the best with words. She always had trouble finding the right words to express how she felt, but right then, she

didn't need any words. She didn't need to find the perfect word to describe how she felt, because she was already sure a word to describe that didn't exist. All she knew was how she felt, and she felt like a blind woman being able to see for the first time.

She knew she loved Mike, she had always known that. She may have spent so many years trying to ignore it or pretend otherwise, but right now she couldn't deny it anymore. All her feelings for him were falling out. All the love she harbored for the boy who pulled her out of the rain on one stormy night in 1983, for the boy who gave her hope for her year away from Hawkins, for the boy who first showed her friendship and trust, for the boy who would always keep her safe. Right now she wanted nothing more than to let herself love him.

Their kiss was short, though it felt like an eternity for them. Their emotions were messy and sprawled out all around their minds, but they were out. When they pulled away from the kiss, Mike and El were both sure of all the feelings they had locked away, pushed into a safe for years and forgot the combination, but they remembered that combination together, and now those feelings were out once again, not able to be denied.

Mike looked down at El and blushed. She gave him a small smile before turning away, not wanting to meet his gaze. That's when his smile dropped.

Every romance movie has the big kiss, the moment where two people finally realize their feelings and come together for one glorious moment where they kiss and everything's right with the world. Movies don't show you what happens after the big kiss though, they just send you off with a claim of "happily ever after."

But that's not what really happens after the big kiss, in fact it almost never ends so perfectly, because for such a passionate moment, it has to end in the most emotional way. Happily ever after is never just one kiss away, and right then, Mike and El were learning what really happens after the big kiss.

They had their moment of glory, their passionate kiss to go down in the movies, but when they pulled away, reality seeped back in. They couldn't stay in their perfect world of understanding and kissing

forever, because Mike and El had to confront the truth of the world they were living in right then. They weren't at their point of understanding and kissing, what their reality really was was two teens hiding their feelings, pretending to date and not understanding where that would lead them.

When the kiss ended, Mike had a glint in his eye, but when he looked down at her, he felt himself give a look of lost hope. He wanted to yell, to scream at himself, he had just had this amazing moment of finally realizing his love for her, and now that Mike looked at El, he figured that kiss could never mean the same to El.

An act, a prank, a lie. That's all they were. They had been putting this act together for weeks now, pretending to be in love, and now Mike realized for himself, it was never an act. His love for El was never a lie.

But to Mike, he thought that's all it could be for her. Their kiss, it was nothing more than a scene in the little show they had been performing. He felt his whole world crashing around him, because now that he had accepted the truth behind his feelings, he had realized why he had denied them for so long. The fear, the pain of rejection. Now Mike wanted to scream at himself for being so stupid, for following along in this stupid plan, that only led to his heart being broken now that he had to accept it was nothing more than a plan.

Mike never dreamed that El could feel the same way as he did, he never dared to hope that their kiss was as tremendous for her as it was to him. Instead Mike fell into his own pity, with a lost hope that told him that everything was just a part of the plan.

Hours past, company left, and Mike ran up to his sister's room for some much-needed advice.

Nancy was sitting on her bed with her nose in a book when Mike came rushing inside, shutting the door firmly behind him.

"I kissed El," He said breathlessly, wishing somehow Nancy could understand the inner turmoil he felt. Instead Nancy just looked up

from her book and raised her eyebrows.

“Yeah, Mike, we all saw it, it wasn’t exactly a surprise.” She looked back down at her reading.

“Nancy!”

“What?”

“We’re not dating,” Mike yelled, “It was all just a plan to mess with everyone!”

“Mike, what the hell?!”

So he fell into his story, telling Nancy all about their plan, and what had been happening the past few weeks. He saw her smirk when he told her what had happened tonight. When he finished, he slumped himself onto her bed, drained from having to recount the entire story. But once he finished sharing, once there was nothing else left to be said, that hopelessness began to set back in.

“I kissed her, Nancy, I kissed her! What do I do?” He groaned.

Without missing a beat, she responded, “Well do you like her?”

Mike just lifted his head up, looking at Nancy and not needing to say anything else. She knew, she always knew, now Mike just knew as well.

“So you do?” Nancy had a smug smirk that under normal circumstances would have made him blush, but right then Mike wasn’t in a place to blush.

“I do, so, so much.”

“So tell her that.”

“I can’t do that!” Mike bolted up, retorting as fast as possible.

“Why?”

Mike took a second to breath, before finally admitting the fear that

had really been bothering him since their kiss earlier, “Because she’ll be mad at me. She’s gonna think I started this whole plan just because I was into her!”

“Well did you?” Nancy asked him.

“No!” Mike yelled out, before lowering his voice as not to attract suspicion from their parents downstairs, “Of course not! Oh my God, I have to end this, don’t I? It’s not fair to her.”

“Mike, calm down, I think you’re freaking out about this too much,” She tried to coax him.

“I kissed her, Nancy! I kissed her and for me it was a real kiss and for her it was just a part of this game we’re playing.” Mike let out a groan of exasperation, “What am I supposed to do?”

Nancy hushed him down, putting her hand on his shoulder in attempt to comfort him, “Mike, you’re a good kid. You know what you think is right, now follow that.”

Mike looked at her for a moment, processing her advice, and coming to a conclusion on what he had to do, “Thanks,” He said quickly, before darting out of the room.

He walked down the hallway towards his own room, finally realizing what he had to do.

He knew he couldn’t do the plan anymore, he had to end this with El.

7. Addicted

Eleven lied awake Thanksgiving night feeling giddy. She couldn't hide the smile that had taken over her entire face, and frankly, she didn't want to. Everytime she closed her eyes, the image of Mike came back to her, his face slowly getting closer to hers. His freckles were so close that she could count them, well, she could if she was able to concentrate, but that didn't seem like it was going to happen any time soon. Her mind was spinning, and every time she thought of Mike she swore it started to spin faster. El could practically still feel his lips pressing onto hers.

Why people use drugs is a mystery, because there are so many better ways to chase a high. El could feel the entire world turning into her own hazy blur from Mike, and she didn't ever want that feeling to stop. She wanted more and more, she wanted to see Mike right now, to dance with him some more and to kiss him again, never letting that high end.

Maybe she had an addiction. El remembered back when Hopper had quit smoking several years ago. After he adopted her, he claimed he wanted to be the best father possible. He never said it, but El knew that just meant he wanted to be the person he was back when Sarah was alive. He started waking up early, he stopped drinking, and he started to take care of himself. He stopped smoking, a habit he only started when he had to watch his own daughter slowly die, and El remembered what that was like for him. The memories from when she was 13 years old came back, with Hopper caving in too many times to go out and buy another pack, then coughing and swearing this was his last time. That all came to a close when he finally quit, however, and El could still hear her father's gruff voice telling her never to pick up a cigarette.

Well, Eleven never smoked a day in her life. She never drank or tried any drugs, but she still had an addiction. People advise you of all the obvious things to stay away from, but no one warns you growing up of the addicting qualities of freckles and moppy hair and a smile that makes the world just a little bit brighter. No one warned Eleven of just how addicting Michael Wheeler could be. She was high on him,

and the giddiness she felt all over didn't feel as if it would ever fade.

She stared up at her ceiling, not thinking about anything in particular. She supposed she was just at peace, content with everything that happened, but El knew it was so much more than that. El was *happy*. Eleven wasn't one to take happiness for granted, she knew better than anyone else how much a fight that could be sometimes, but right now she was exhilarated, carefree, radiant, she was too happy to think, too ecstatic with her life to really have anything to think about other than just basking in the moment.

Her peace was eventually interrupted by static waving into her room, the crackling sound pulling her from her bliss. El glanced over at the supercom besides her bed, and smiled hearing faint breathing coming from it. Sure, she talked to all the boys on it, but there was only one boy who'd be radioing her this late at night. She smiled over at the old walkie-talkie, and pulled the antenna up.

"Mike," She said into the supercom.

"Hey," He answered softly, "You could hear me?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

It was quiet for a moment, then in an empty voice, Mike responded, "We need to talk."

El could feel all the breath being sucked from her lungs. Despite this, she still felt that giddiness creeping up on her. A small part of her couldn't help but hope he wanted to talk about their kiss, and well, that he felt the same as she did about it.

"What's going on?" She asked, trying to keep her voice serious.

"Uh, nevermind actually. It's not important." Mike was speaking quickly, and El's brows furrowed. Why did he suddenly not want to talk to her?

"Mike."

"Just, um, come over to my house tomorrow at noon. Over and out."

He turned off his supercom before she could answer. El stared at the

walkie-talkie for a minute, before setting it down besides her. She fell asleep that night feeling as though Mike had just left her in the dust.

Mike had the house all to himself the next day. Nancy and Karen went Black Friday shopping, Ted was at work, and Holly had a playdate. That just left Mike, well it left Mike and El.

He'd spent hours pacing his house before she got there. He didn't want to end the plan, in fact he wanted more than anything for it to continue. Mike wanted all the excuses in the world to go on more dates with El, to dance with her in his livingroom with his entire family watching, to kiss her a million more times. He couldn't do it though, he couldn't keep this plan going while knowing it was all just a lie, and he couldn't lie to El. It wasn't fair to her to continue with the plan while he harbored his secret feelings behind it.

So as much as he despised the idea, Mike knew he had to end it.

When El arrived, it did nothing to ease the racing of his heart. He figured he wasn't doing a good job of hiding his agitation, but he didn't care. Maybe it was a good thing there was some tension in the room.

"So, uh, why'd you call me last night?" El pressed him, taking a seat on the couch and gesturing for him to come sit down next to her. Mike ignored her gesture, instead continuing to pace in front of her.

Mike stopped in his tracks to look at her, "We need to talk."

"Yeah, you, uh, mentioned that."

Mike stared at El for a moment. She was looking down at her feet, and he couldn't see just how fast her heart was beating. She couldn't take the anticipation, she just wanted Mike to say whatever he had to say before it destroyed her. Of course, she couldn't help but get her hopes up about what he wanted to talk to her about.

He took a deep breath. This was just like ripping a Band-Aid off, the more he put it off, the more it would hurt when he did it. He just had to rip it off and get it over with.

“About last night...”

“Yeah?” El looked up at him now with wide eyes, desperate to hear whatever he had to say.

Mike turned away, he couldn’t look at her when he said this. He couldn’t look the girl he loved in the eyes while he told her he wanted to break up, even if it was a fake break up, “I think this is getting out of hand.”

“What?”

“All this. The plan, us dating, it’s gone on long enough.” Mike stared at his shoes.

“Are you saying you want to end this?” Mike gave a weak nod, and El felt as all the hope that she had built up before had crumbled away. She felt as all the expectations she made, and all the optimism she held that Mike *maybe* wanted something more fell apart beneath her, “W- why?”

Mike looked back up at her when she said that. What was he supposed to tell her? He couldn’t do anything but yell at himself, because he couldn’t tell her the truth. How was he supposed to tell her that he’s been in love with her since they were 12 years old? How was he supposed to tell her that he couldn’t hold her to this when it was so much more for him? How was he supposed to tell her anything about his feelings for her? He couldn’t do it, he couldn’t tell her the truth. So he reached out for a lie, anything to get her to stop asking him some ridiculous question like *why?*, because Mike couldn’t give her an honest answer to that.

“I guess I just don’t think it’s believable that we’d date,” He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly.

El looked down, her eyes falling to the floor once again, “Oh.”

Mike couldn’t stop himself from babbling on as always, “I mean, I just can’t ever understand why the boys would think I want to date you,” His voice started to drift off at the end.

El’s head darted up, eyes staring daggers at Mike, “What?”

“I- I just mean that-”

“That you can’t see why anyone would want to date me?” El stared at him, and Mike gulped. She wasn’t angry, and he could see that. Instead she just looked at him, with her eyebrows raised and her eyes sad and Mike could see, she wasn’t mad, she was just hurt.

“No! That’s not what I mean!”

El looked up at him, her eyes open wide, begging for an explanation. Mike wanted to run next to her, to erase all of her pain. He wanted to assure her that that was the last thing he’d ever think, that she was perfect and God, did he understand what it was like to want to date her, to be in love with her. But what was he supposed to tell her? Mike hated himself in that moment. He wanted to rip his hair out and scream because he just hurt the girl he loved, but he couldn’t assure her otherwise without saying too much.

Mike yelled at himself, grappling deep within his mind to find anything to say to swear to her that that wasn’t what he meant, that in reality that was the furthest from what he meant. But while he was busy trying to figure out what to say, El was just waiting for him to say anything. And when she waited and waited and nothing happened, she didn’t want to sit there anymore.

El got up from the couch and started to walk out of the house. Mike wanted to call out after her, but he stopped himself. It wasn’t like he knew what to say anyway.

Mike thought he already knew the hardest time he had to watch as El walked out of his life, but now he wasn’t quite so sure. He thought when he was twelve years old, watching as she disappeared right before his eyes, that would be the most painful time he ever had to see El leave. But after that, El came back. Mike got a second chance to be with her.

Right now, as the front door swung closed behind El, Mike wasn’t sure if he’d get another chance.

8. Leap of Faith

Notes for the Chapter:

Quick thank you to everyone who supported me writing this fic, it means the world to me :)

“El. El. Please tell me you’re there. El!”

Eleven stared at the supercom besides her, debating whether or not to pick it up. After she had talked to Mike earlier, she came straight home, shutting herself away from everyone. Mike didn’t try to stop her when she walked out. Mike didn’t call her when she got home. Mike didn’t reach out to her at all. She yelled at herself for being disappointed, after all, he had made his feelings perfectly clear when she went over there, but still, El couldn’t help herself from wanting him to do more.

Now it was nearly midnight, and his voice was just now ringing in through the supercom. El didn’t want to talk to him. She had wanted to talk to him ten hours ago, but now she was just exhausted.

“Please El, I know you’re there. I’m so sorry. I was being a complete mouthbreather, just let me apologize.”

Eleven let out a breath. Even when her friends hurt her, she still loved them. She didn’t want to fight with Mike. So, hesitantly, she picked up the supercom, “Hey.”

“Eleven! You’re here! I’m so, so sorry El. I’m such a wastoid,” Mike started to babble into his radio, “I shouldn’t have said that stuff. I’m so-”

“Mike, it’s okay,” El interrupted him. She didn’t care about an apology, she wasn’t mad at him, she was just upset. There was nothing an apology could do to solve that, “Just please don’t talk about it.”

Mike let out a sigh on the other end, “All that stuff I said was stupid.”

El didn’t listen to what he had to say after that. She didn’t want to

hear any more attempts from Mike to make her to feel better. She wished she didn't feel this way, that all she needed was an apology and she would feel perfectly fine, but that wasn't the case. El figured she was acting ridiculous, but she couldn't shake the thought from her mind that Mike didn't even like *fake* dating her, and she was naively wishing they could become something more. Worse than that, he had made it perfectly clear that he couldn't even understand *why* someone would want that with El.

She didn't want to fight with Mike, but that didn't mean she wanted to talk to him either. As she heard him babble on and on uselessly into the supercom, El found herself wishing that the batteries would suddenly go out so she wouldn't have to listen to Mike any longer.

"Mike, it's late. We should both go to sleep," She cut in.

Mike was quiet for a second before piping up hopefully, "Oh, uh, okay. But you're still coming over for the campaign tomorrow, right?"

"Yes. Night Mike."

"Goodnight El."

Mike put down his supercom, staring at it sadly for a moment before picking up his Dungeon Master's binder and beginning to doodle in it. He wasn't as oblivious as he came across sometimes, he knew El wasn't just her normal quiet. She was still upset, and he couldn't think about it without a rush of guilt coming straight for his heart.

He had been yelling at himself all day. He knew ending the plan with El was the right thing to do, but he couldn't get over just how wrongly he had done it. He had spent every second since she left debating whether or not to call her. He wanted to hide himself away and not face the fact that he had just hurt the girl he loves, but the guilt was too overpowering. He needed to talk to her.

Though, talking didn't do much good in the end. He should have expected that. You can apologize a million times, but you can't take

back the things you've already said, and sometimes that's the only thing that could possibly help.

With a huff, Mike threw down his campaign binder. He'd been looking forward to the campaign tomorrow for weeks, but now he was dreading to think about it. Instead he pulled his backpack over to the side of his bed, drawing out his notebook.

He figured he should at least get something useful done, so he started to work on his homework. Mike liked school, he always had, and right now looking at math and numbers seemed to be the only thing that could really distract him.

Still, even his beloved algebra couldn't keep his mind from wandering. It was like every single thing around him reminded him of El. Maybe it didn't help that he had a photo of the two of them, arms wrapped around each other and smiling, right next to his bed. He purposely put the picture there to always remind him of El. He figured it could give him some reminder to be happy when he saw her face. Well, right now the picture was having the opposite effect. He turned the photo over, refusing to look at it any more.

All he wanted was to get his homework finished, to find the value of X . Everyone had always told Mike that he was a smart kid, well a smart kid should be able to focus on homework, not getting so distraught over a girl that he couldn't even concentrate.

His eyes kept drifting towards the blank page on the next sheet of his notebook, and he started to write. Mike didn't question what he was doing, he just needed to get out all the feelings he'd been holding in. The same feelings which would have spared him from this whole mess if he could have just told them to El. On the blank page Mike started to scribble away rapidly, writing down everything he felt, all his pent up emotions towards the girl who he couldn't get off his mind. All the reasons he loved her were scrawled out over the paper, all the reasons why he just couldn't get her off his mind.

Maybe he didn't have the guts to tell her, but Mike couldn't keep his feelings inside any longer.

Mike didn't think telling the boys would be easy, but he didn't think it would be this hard.

"You guys did not break up!" Lucas rolled his eyes in disbelief.

"Yeah," Dustin nodded, "You gotta be pulling our legs or something."

"Wait is this why she was ignoring me last night?" Will asked.

Mike stared at his feet. He had originally wanted to tell his friends the full truth about the plan, but after yesterday he figured it didn't matter. Just saying they broke up would explain the tension between him and El, which he didn't particularly want to explain to the guys.

"I don't know what to tell you, we broke up yesterday. That's it."

"Did you get into a fight?"

"Why'd you break up?"

"Did she dump you?"

"Are you still gonna be friends?"

Dustin and Will hounded Mike with questions, none of which he really wanted to answer. Lucas was the only one who remained quiet, though, eyeing Mike suspiciously. Then he slapped Mike right on the arm, surprising all the boys into silence.

"What the hell, Mike?! What could *possibly* have gone wrong that's keeping you from being with the love of your life?!" Lucas yelled at him, his outburst startling Mike.

Mike stared at his feet, not wanting to meet Lucas's eyes, "Well, I guess she's not the love of my life then."

"Bullshit! I've dealt with you two flirting back and forth for four years now. Maybe you're too oblivious to see anything, but El is so much more to you than just some month-long fling!"

"Just let it go, okay?!" Mike exploded, anger suddenly filling him from the boys' relentless input. He couldn't keep himself from

erupting, "Nothing with me and El has ever been how you guys see it! Nothing's gonna happen between us, you just have to accept that!"

Mike knew he was being too harsh on his friends, they didn't mean anything wrong, but he couldn't stand it. He couldn't just listen to them go on and on about how him and El were supposedly soulmates. They didn't know the first thing about what Mike and El's relationship was like, they had no way to judge it. Mike couldn't stand hearing them say all that when right now he had hurt the girl they claimed was the love of his life, and he was sure that even if he did come clean now, it wouldn't fix things. Even if he was somehow able to work up the bravery to tell El the truth, it would only make things more tense between them.

Mike hated this. He felt like Luke Skywalker, pining after his Princess Leia, only to find out that they could never be together. El was going to go on to meet her Han Solo, and Mike, well, eventually he'd have to accept that nothing would ever happen between him and El.

As much as it tore away at Mike's heart, he decided that he just needed to stop thinking about El like anything was going to happen. He messed up all possibility for that anyway.

They had started the campaign early, so by 6 o'clock the teenagers were able to have vanquished the Baphomet demon from the kingdom. Mike's weeks of work for this campaign had payed off, shown by the loud whooping and yells of excitement from the boys around the table. Mike just smiled to himself, looking down slightly. He wished the campaign had made him feel better, but even when he transported himself off to another realm, a whole new fantasy, he still couldn't get one girl off his mind.

He noticed the questioning looks from Lucas all throughout the game, who could tell that Mike's entire focus was not in the campaign. Maybe he had stopped hounding Mike after his outburst earlier, but that didn't change his mind about the topic. He may not know what had happened between Mike and El, but he knew his best friend, and he knew that whatever happened, Mike couldn't stop thinking about her.

Lucas piped up once the cheering ended, “Hey, do you guys wanna watch a movie or something?”

“Only if I get to pick the movie,” Dustin retorted.

“We both can,” Lucas let out a sigh, “Come on let’s go rent one. Will, you come with us too.”

Mike rolled his eyes, it was clear what Lucas was doing. He barely spoke to El since she got there this morning, and even then all he said to her was a part of the campaign. Leave it to Lucas to come up with some excuse to get them alone together.

As soon as the three boys left, awkwardness set in immediately. It wasn’t like Mike and El for things to be so quiet. Mike was a talkative person, he didn’t like silence, he hated the way it sunk in around them in waves of tension. He liked to talk, and he liked to make noise. The unnatural silence wasn’t something he enjoyed to face. It was when it’s quiet that other things start to come out, like the hostility in the room, or the voice in his head that yelled that this was all his fault.

He tried to distract himself, picking up a Rubik’s cube from the table and beginning to fiddle with it. El was sitting on the couch, and he glanced over to see she had pulled some homework from her bag.

No, Mike heard inside his brain, Stop looking at El. You ruined things with her so now you need to stop thinking about her constantly.

Mike turned back around and looked down at the Rubik’s cube. He knew the voice was right, and that he needed to stop focusing on El. He tried to divert all his attention to the toy in front of him. *Just focus on the colors*, he told himself. *Don’t think about El, just think about the white squares.* Mike stared at it, trying to pivot all the sides around to get the white pieces together.

Just focus on the squares. Think about the white ones, put them together.

His mind started to scream at him, and Mike wanted to throw the Rubik’s cube down, but he couldn’t, because without it all he would think about was El.

White squares, white squares, white sq-

He let out a chuckle of relief. He had gotten the entire white side all together, now he just had to think about the rest of the cube. Next was the blue side. Mike started to fidget with the blue pieces to try and get those together.

Then he looked back at his white side, the only thing he was proud of today. And of course, while fiddling with the blue squares, Mike had managed to mess up the entire white side.

Just like you messed things up with El.

Mike couldn't do it. He threw down the Rubik's cube and got up, he needed to get out of this basement.

"I'm gonna go get something to eat. You want anything?" Mike looked over at El on the couch, her head immersed in her papers.

She didn't even look up when she responded, simply letting out a dry, "No." Mike sighed, just wishing El would say more to him. He looked solemnly at his feet and started to walk up the stairs.

"Wait Mike."

He bolted around to face her, desperate to hear whatever she had to say to him. His eyes widened when he looked at her, she had taken her face out of her homework and was looking back at him. Even something as simple as eye contact made Mike's heart beat out of his chest. Mike couldn't help but wish this was it, this was the moment she would finally start talking to him. She would *really* talk to him and they would fix things and all this godforsaken tension would go away.

"I'm having trouble with this math problem, could I borrow your notes?"

Mike tried to conceal his disappointment. Of course she was just asking about homework, nothing that really mattered to him, to *them*. He tried to contain his downfallen expression, "Yeah, sure. They're in my backpack over there, you can grab them."

Walking into his kitchen, Mike grabbed an apple, tossing it between his hands a few times. He put it down on the counter with a huff of his breath, and grabbed a knife, starting to cut it into slices.

He didn't want to let himself hate this, it was his fault after all. Mike figured he shouldn't *be allowed* to hate a situation that he had created, but he'd be damned if that was the case. He hated every second down there in the basement, every second where he had to face El knowing that everything was ruined because of him. The friendship he'd had for four years was now destroyed because he made a stupid mistake.

A week ago, he'd be perfectly happy being there with El. They would be talking and laughing like everything was right with the world, because that was all before he'd realized what he felt for her. Mike wished he could take back his feelings, that he could just pretend they weren't there and everything would be okay, but he couldn't. He couldn't just wish love away.

Love was what had gotten him into this mess after all. The fear that came along with it prompted him into saying the wrong thing, into making a stupid mistake, and now no matter what he did, it would only make things more awkward between them.

Mike kept sulking as he cut his apple, too distracted by El to really care about anything else. All he wanted was to be able to turn time back, to have never agreed to this plan. None of this had worked out as he expected it to.

His thoughts drifted back to El. He wondered how she felt about all this, what she was thinking about right now. Mike figured the answer to that was probably just her homework, she wasn't as torn by this as he was, she could still focus on minor things like homework without being too distracted by him. Because at the end of the day, Mike knew this couldn't destroy her the way it destroyed him, because there was no way she could love him the way he loved her.

Mike got so wrapped up in his thoughts of El, he stopped concentrating on slicing his apple. He didn't even notice when the

apple rolled out of the way and the knife came straight for his hand.

El flipped through the pages of Mike's notebook, just wanting to find the formula for the problem she was stuck on. His messy scribbling littered the pages, and El hated that she found it so endearing. He always thought faster than he could write his thoughts down, and you could see it in his writing.

Each page of his notebook was filled with his barely-decipherable writing, El just wanted to find the formula when something else caught her eye. She saw her own name written on the top of a page in Mike's messy script. Letting out a short gasp, her eyes never left the page as she scanned over every word.

Reasons I love El Byers

I love that even when she's away from me, she's still on my mind constantly. She's a part of me, whether she knows it or not. I couldn't live without her.

I love that she makes me feel like a better person. She brings out the most compassionate side of me, because I wanna be the best person I can for her.

I love that she's the bravest person I've ever met, and after everything she's been through, she's still the best person I've ever known.

I love that just thinking about her makes my heart pump faster, and makes me melt inside.

I love that my life has been better ever since I met her. She changed my life and made it so much happier.

I love that she's saved my life more times than I can count. I know I always have someone to protect me.

I love when she falls asleep on top of me, and she looks so peaceful with her head on my shoulder.

I love how she sticks with me, for both my good and bad sides.

I love that she's the strongest person I've ever known, that she's been strong even when no one would ever expect her to.

I love that she puts everyone else before herself, and all I want to do is put her before me, because she deserves someone to put her first.

Eleven couldn't believe what she was reading. It had to be some sort

of joke, she refused to believe that Mike had seriously written this. Her eyes were widening, reading each line over and over again, head spinning too much to think.

Her freakout was interrupted, however, when she heard a loud scream from upstairs.

“Mike, are you okay?!”

El didn't know what to say, she had run upstairs only to find Mike leaning against the counter. A towel was wrapped around his hand, and she could see red from his blood seeping through.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” He tried to smile through his grimace, “The knife just slipped and got me.”

“Let me see it,” She demanded. Mike shook his head at first, but then she gave him a concerned look and he sighed. He unwrapped the towel and she saw his hand, with a large gash over his palm. It was nothing serious, but he was bleeding.

“See, I'm fine.”

El stared at him, giving a slight smirk that made his heart beat twice as fast, “At least let me bandage it for you.”

She ran to go get some gauze and first aid from the bathroom, and when she came back she slowly wrapped it around Mike's hand, never taking her concentration away from his cut. When she finished, she looked up at Mike, and her hand lingered on his absentmindedly. He stared back at her, grinning as he looked at her like she had just saved his life. That's when El remembered what she had been doing before Mike's yell pulled her away, and she looked down, a pink blush erupting on her face.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Mike broke the silence.

El looked back up at him, confused, “What?”

“For your homework?”

She felt as her face flushed beyond her control, “Yeah I got it.”

It went silent once again, and Mike looked down. That’s when El, still thinking about his list, decided it was time for her to torture Mike a little.

“About what you said yesterday,” Mike’s head shot up, “Can you just tell me what you meant by it?”

“I didn’t mean anything, El. It was just-”

“Just explain why you think I’m so unlovable,” El looked at him, giving the best hurt expression she could muster.

Mike opened his mouth to respond immediately, words coming to his mouth before he had time to overthink them, “What?! El you’re not unlovable! I lo-”

He cut himself short, and El had to contain her smirk. Mike took a deep breath and decided, this was his moment, even if it did nothing, this was his chance to take a leap of faith. Mike’s mind screamed at him that this was a bad idea, but he didn’t care. He always told El the truth. Friends don’t lie, and they don’t keep secrets either.

“I- I love you, El.”

El smirked in response, she was almost done torturing him, but not quite yet, “As a friend?”

“I- I-” Mike just stared at her, stammering in his quest to find words.

Eleven couldn’t contain her grin anymore, “I love you too, Mike.”

It went quiet. Mike stared up at her, sporting a pink blush and a grin, while shaking his head slowly, “You what?”

“I found your list.”

It took a moment for realization to dawn on Mike’s face, but when it did, his previously pink blush turned into a deep scarlet. He looked at El, and he knew, he no longer had the choice whether to take a leap of faith or not, it was all already out there.

"I was stupid, I couldn't tell you how I felt and I messed up. Y- you were asking why I wanted to end the plan and I couldn't admit the truth and screwed up. But you're not unlovable, and if I messed up once I'll spend the rest of my life showing you otherwise." He knew he was babbling on, but he looked up to see El blushing too.

She interrupted him, "That's reason number one."

"What?"

"I'm making my own list, Reasons I Love Mike Wheeler." She leaned in and Mike could feel his heart beating out of his chest, but for once, he really didn't care.

They kissed for a brief moment. It wasn't a magical kiss that led to their own breakthroughs like before, no new realizations came out the second their lips touched. Instead, this time they just smiled into the kiss, with a feeling of *finally* being where they were supposed to be.

Mike was the first to pull away, a question on his mind that he couldn't let slide for another second.

"Will you go out with me, for real this time?"

"Yes."